

Can Professors Foretell Future?

In private life as in public life, there is only one source of knowledge: the past. For the present is merely an evanescent film upon the deep well of the past; the present is vanishing as I write these lines. And the future is unknowable: the event is in the hand of God.

At Bowdoin College, in Maine, however, it is proposed to establish "a chair in futuristics." Bowdoin's new president, Dr. Roger Howell Jr., hopes to find a professor "who could survey with the highest scholarly competence the broad sweep of scientific and social advance and who could discuss the implications, on a very broad inter-disciplinary scale, of where we are going."

Also Dr. Howell desires "a new humanism," dedicated to respect for Man; he doesn't

mention respect for God. (I respect various individual men, but I've always found it difficult to respect abstract Man: he's a most feeble and selfish creature, if untouched by divine grace.) "Humanistic education, as we know it, has dealt very largely with the past," Dr. Howell continues; "the sciences and social studies have involved themselves very largely with the present. But what is desperately needed is a sense of future vision."

The trouble with this "futurism," your servant ventures to comment, is that it rapidly sinks into mere idle speculation. No professor knows whether he himself will be alive tomorrow — let alone the shape of all things to come. The historical consciousness is far more valuable than a vague "sense of future vi-

sion." Men and nations are not predictable; and, as Dr. Howell himself suggests, mere projecting of present trends may do more mischief than good — prophecies that fulfill themselves.

Only if we know the past, through the true historical consciousness, may we hope to build the better future to which the president of Bowdoin aspires. "Those who ignore the past," says George Santayana, "are compelled to repeat it." We cannot apprehend man's limitations and possibilities unless we know something of human nature through historical and literary and philosophical disciplines.

And how disheartened we would be if you and I really were able to foretell the future! Life is worth living because it is mysterious, you and I not knowing what may be around the next corner. For one thing, you and I are going to die in a not very distant future: but spare us the knowledge of that precise day.

To make a reasonable preparation for the future of a people is a proper part of the art of statecraft. But to assume that man totally controls his own destiny and can foresee — nay, direct — the actions of posterity would be an act of arrogance, self-defeating.

In some future year, for instance, Bowdoin College may abolish the "chair in futuristics" now proposed by Dr. Howell — having discovered it to be a boondoggle. "Ye unborn ages, crowd not on my soul!" If the people of the year 2000 ever bother to read our predictions for their time, probably they will acquire a lesson in the vanity of human wishes.

(C) General Features

Sydney J. Harris

Ignorance

At the recent convention of the American Physical Society in Chicago, two researchers from the University of Maryland and Cal Tech shook up the august gathering with reports of "intense gravity waves" apparently coming from the core of the Milky Way.

These gravity waves — which are impossible to believe and impossible to reject — contradict our whole present body of knowledge in physics, and fly in the face of our current theories about the universe.

They indicate that astonishing amounts of energy exist at the center of the galaxy — far more than anyone had believed possible, if our modern cosmological theories are anywhere near correct. More important, they bring into question whether "nature" really operates in the whole cosmos the way we think it does.

What has happened in physical science the last 50 years has been a tremendous breakthrough from knowledge to ignorance. As we have learned more and more, we have been plunged into contradiction, paradox and enigma. As we get closer to the center of "substance," it turns into something else — something not substantial at all, but simply mathematical, statistical, and quite "immaterial."

Because of the customary cultural lag associated with such matters, the public has not yet caught up with these develop-